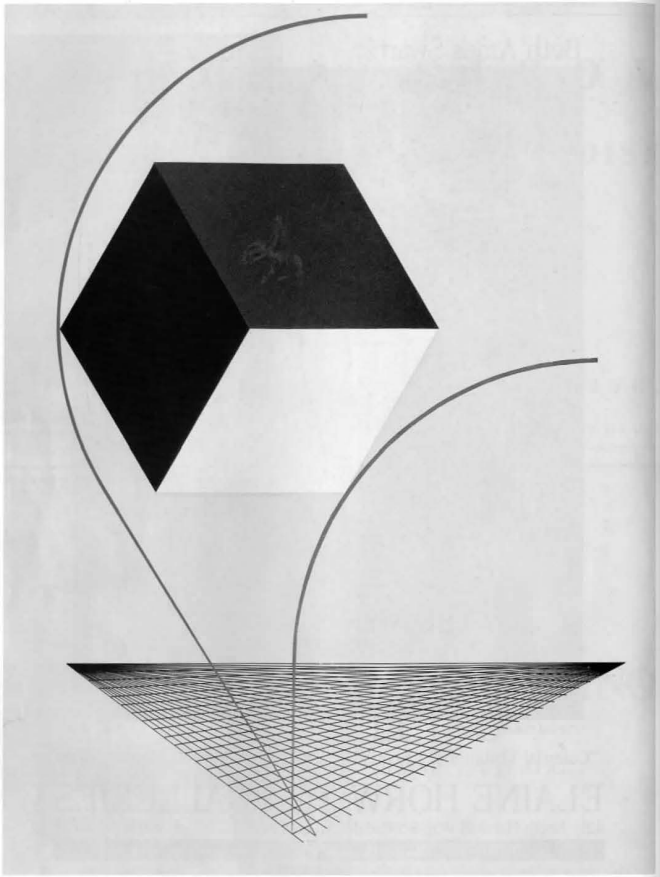


El Lissitzky: Proun, *1924–25, pen and ink, watercolor and collage, 25⅛ by 19½ inches. Rhode Island School of Design.*

El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility

A small but many-sided Lissitzky exhibition showed that his revolutionary politics were best represented in the abstract language and space of his "Prouns," rather than in his later propagandistic photomontages.

BY YVE-ALAIN BOIS

Can we speak of more than one El Lissitzky? Lissitzky the Jewish militant, Lissitzky the Suprematist, the functionalist advisor, the advertisement designer, the Soviet propagandist, the theoretician of abstract art—these are only a few of his numerous identities. Should we regard this diversity as part of his message, as if Lissitzky were saying that the modern artist must be a protean kaleidoscope? Or should we, on the contrary, seek a common denominator beneath the multiple aspects of his work, and a continuity beneath the apparent discontinuity of his career? How can we make one "author" of Lissitzky? This is the essential question that was raised once again by the recent exhibition of his work presented by the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University.

Organized by Peter Nisbet, curator at the Busch-Reisinger, this was Lissitzky's first one-man show in the United States. It brought together works from Harvard's own extensive holdings, from North American public and private collections (more than one would have guessed) and from the Sprengel Museum in Hannover and the Staatliche Galerie in Halle (the two museums, one in each of the Germanies, that co-organized the exhibition with Harvard). The diversity of these sources provided a rare anthology of Lissitzky's works, many of which had never been shown before. Moreover, the exhibition was accompanied by a copiously illustrated catalogue that will surely become a landmark in Lissitzky studies. It contains a long, well-documented essay by Nisbet, as well as three texts by Lissitzky (previously unpublished in English), a catalogue raisonné of his typo-

Untitled (Superimposed Portrait), 1926–30, photograph, 6 by 4½ inches. Museum of Modern Art.

In the exhibition, the abrupt passage from the abstract Suprematist works of the 1920s to the more overtly politicized works of the 1930s reinforced a theory of discontinuity in Lissitzky's oeuvre.

graphical work (much more profuse than is generally thought) and an annotated transcription of a list Lissitzky compiled of his *Prouns* (prepared for an exhibition of his works in Berlin in 1924).

The show, with its 83 pieces, was actually rather modest in size (more than half of the works were books and other typographical works designed by Lissitzky). And due to the closing of the old Busch-Reisinger building, the exhibition was held in the small ground-floor gallery of the new Sackler Museum. This venue in part determined the limited scale of the exhibition and presented Nisbet with a curatorial choice: it would be impossible to show "everything," but to show "a little of everything" would result in mediocrity. Nisbet turned this limitation into a certain advantage by confining the exhibition to four kinds of work: "illustrations for Jewish books, *Prouns*, photographs and typography—that is, to Lissitzky's two-dimensional work."

Certainly concentrating on Lissitzky's more traditional two-dimensional work establishes an artificial coherence (one to which Lissitzky's work is particularly resistant), but this focus had at least one merit: it emphasized the crucial work of the early 1920s and the development of Lissitzky's major project, the *Prouns*. (*Proun*—pronounced "pro-oon"—a neologism coined by Lissitzky to refer to his abstract paintings, is an acronym for the Russian equivalent of "Project for the Affirmation of the New.") In a comprehensive way, the show allowed one to assess a decisive moment (if not *the* decisive moment) in Lissitzky's career (even more perhaps than an exhaustive presentation of his work would have allowed). Thus, it is not so much the choice of works that must be questioned, but the manner in which this choice was presented and "interpreted" by the exhibition.

How then, and according to what criteria, was Lissitzky's corpus divided up? As soon as one entered the exhibition, one could see at a glance that most of the space was dedicated to Lissitzky's pictorial work from 1919 to 1923. (His pictorial activity from 1924 to 1925 was documented only by 4 *Prouns*.) This work was spread over two large walls, one with the *Proun* paintings, the other with his three lithographic portfolios from 1921 and 1923. Including the lithographs from the *First Proun Portfolio* and the *First Kestner Portfolio*, the accompanying sketches and the paintings, the show comprised approximately 50 *Prouns*, which occupied three-quarters of the wall-space. By comparison, the presentation of his typographical work up until 1925 was much less spectacular. Aside from the inherent difficulties of adequately exhibiting books (a book must be manipulated in order to convey its volume—think of Mayakovsky's *Dlia golosa*, for example, with its thumb-index and palm-size format), the books were simply less imposing than the *Prouns* (though no less interesting). Although some effort was made to display the books as *objects*—by opening several copies in different places, by taking them apart and spreading the pages out on the wall, by showing them standing and fanned out—these techniques did not counteract the (false) impression that the *Prouns* greatly outnumbered the typographical works. This impression was due not only to the difference in scale, but also to a difference in status between that granted to the paintings (hanging vertically) and that granted to the books (documents, mostly presented horizontally in a showcase). It is this fundamental opposition which, as we shall see, Lissitzky's work attempted to subvert.

Finally, although we were given some information, however succinct, about Lissitzky's graphic work from the late 1920s to the middle of the 1930s, we were told virtually *nothing* about his exhibition designs of 1923–27 nor about his architectural projects (even though the Busch-Reisinger owns several important sketches of Lissitzky's famous *Abstract Cabinet* in Hannover, 1926–27, these were not included in the exhibition).[1] As a result, the exhibition moved almost without transition from walls and panels devoted to the *Prouns* and to Lissitzky's typographical experimentation of the 1920s, to his photomontages of the Stalin era published in the Soviet propaganda magazine *USSR in Construction*.

What could this mean? Were we being told that there is only a single step between the Lissitzky of 1923 and the Lissitzky of 1932, when he began to collaborate actively on *USSR in Construction*? Judging from the installation, this did seem to be the case. For example, Nisbet, concerned with demonstrating that Lissitzky was interested in photographic experimentation before his "late period," hung two extraordinary multiple-exposure photographs from 1923 close to the elaborate photomontaged cover of the report *Industry of Socialism—Heavy Industry*, designed by Lissitzky and presented to the Seventh Congress of Soviets in 1935. In another instance, the large wall devoted to the elegant *Proun* paintings gave way abruptly to two showcases containing Lissitzky's 1927 typographical works. Prominently displayed was the catalogue of the USSR pavilion at the *Pressa* exhibition (Cologne, 1928), open to a photomontage showing the pavilion's extraordinary, agitational installation by Lissitzky. On the adjacent wall was a "monumentalizing" propaganda poster for the *Russische Ausstellung* (Zurich, 1929). Here, Soviet youth is represented by a pair of giant heads looming over architectural structures drawn in perspective (the faces of those heroes comprise a monstrous unity since they share an eye—a bodily fusion signifying solidarity and singleness of purpose). One last example: the wall devoted to the portfolios that included the 1923 album *Victory over the Sun*—a kind of anthropomorphization of the *Prouns* which did not entirely satisfy Lissitzky—ended with a showcase in which pages of *USSR in Construction* show Lissitzky's signature at the bottom of a photomontage deifying Stalin. In fact, the insistence with which Nisbet repeatedly underlined this stylistic jump—the abrupt passage from the Suprematist works of the early 1920s to more politicized works of the late 1920s and 1930s—reinforced a theory of discontinuity in Lissitzky's work.

There are at least two Lissitzkys, says this exhibition: Lissitzky the formalist, creator of the *Prouns*, student of Malevich, sympathizing with the Revolution but not moved to politics, desirous of leaving a neutral territory to art and thus inclined toward abstraction; and Lissitzky the propagandist, creator of photomontages glorifying the nation and Stalin, a Lissitzky who owed his survival to his hardly glorious collaboration with tyranny (the catalogue informs us of the protection he received, notably from Beria, the organizer of the Stalinist purges[2]). Between the two, there is a hiatus that the exhibition dramatizes by its omission of Lissitzky's architecture and exhibition designs, and its almost total neglect of the years 1925–27, which are crucial for several reasons.

Yet one must not be too quick to criticize, and I believe that Nisbet must be given credit for having once again raised the question of continuity and discontinuity in Lissitzky's work. Indeed, this question surfaced in the exhibition in a case that has nothing to do with the relation between art and

Above, The Current is Switched on, *double-page photomontage from* USSR in Construction, *no. 10, October 1932.*
Bottom left, cover of Industry of Socialism—Heavy Industry for the Seventh Congress of Soviets, *1935.*
Bottom right, Lissitzky's cover for Mayakovsky's Dlia golosa *(For the Voice), 1923.*

The Fire Came and Burnt the Stick *(above)* **and One Goat** *(below), 1919. Color lithographs, each 10½ by 10 inches, from the* **Khad Gadya.** *Collection Jewish Museum, photo Art Resource.*

politics: in a kind of antechamber, off the main room of the exhibition, were displayed the pages of *Khad Gadya*, a small book for children designed by Lissitzky in 1919 and based on the Jewish Passover story. Although these pages were accompanied by a few book covers and other illustrations of the same period, the 12 lithographs of *Khad Gadya* dominated the room. They were chosen (and rightly so) as the best representation of Lissitzky's production before the invention of the *Prouns*. As such, this work calls attention to an enigma: how does one move from this "early" Lissitzky to the Lissitzky of the abstract paintings, especially since there is only a few months time between the two?

Lissitzky's beginnings and the circumstances that led to the birth of the *Prouns* are well known. Having been refused entrance into the St. Petersburg academy (most probably because he was a Jew), Lissitzky left for Darmstadt in 1909 where he studied architecture and engineering. He returned to Moscow to complete his education when World War I broke out. There, he participated actively in the Jewish Renaissance movement and he illustrated, under the obvious influence of Marc Chagall, an entire series of children's books. In 1919, Chagall invited him to the Vitebsk art school to direct the printing, architecture and graphic arts studios.

At this point the most unforseeable event in Lissitzky's career occurred: rather than continuing to be Chagall's faithful supporter and zealous imitator—which was obviously the reason why Chagall had invited him—Lissitzky abandoned all figuration in his art as of the fall of 1919, when his first *Prouns* appeared.[3] The "Jewish revival" was replaced by "revolution in art"; little people flying over rooftops were replaced by geometric cubes and volumes floating in infinite space. Historians are content to assign a specific cause to such an about-face, and to reduce this enigma to a logical series of biographical circumstances: in this case, Malevich's arrival at Vitebsk in September 1919 and the manner in which he replaced Chagall at the head of the school, serving as a veritable guru for the students. In one sense, these historians are not wrong: at the time, Lissitzky was extremely susceptible to "outside influences," as is evident in all his work before 1919, and there is no doubt that, from the time of his arrival, Malevich acted as a catalyst for his work.

But there is another way of looking at the question. It could be said that, prior to meeting Malevich, prior to this "Suprematist epiphany," Lissitzky had not yet found his true direction. It would certainly be unjust to see the *Prouns* as the work of a mere follower. If the Lissitzky who created *Khad Gadya* incorporated Chagall's motifs in a rather servile manner, the Lissitzky who created the *Prouns* offered from the outset a very personal interpretation of Malevich's Suprematism.

The generous presence of *Khad Gadya* in this exhibition reinforces Nisbet's view of Lissitzky's work as being essentially discontinuous. Ultimately, Nisbet's presentation postulates three Lissitzkys: a "Chagallian" Lissitzky at the beginning of 1919 (L 1); the "Suprematist" Lissitzky of the end of 1919 and the early 1920s (L 2); and the "Stalinist" Lissitzky of the 1930s (L 3). The implicit thesis of the exhibition is that the Chagallian Lissitzky bears no relation to the Suprematist, *and* that this second Lissitzky is only accidentally (biographically) linked to the third Lissitzky.

This theory, although merely implied by the show, is aptly demonstrated. And I must say that with regard to the distinction between the first and second Lissitzkys, I share Nisbet's criticism of the continuist theory. I believe he is right when he disagrees in the catalogue with those who see in the often flat and geometrized flying figures of *Khad Gadya* the antecedents of the abstract volumes depicted in the *Prouns*, or those who assimilate the proto-Art-Deco cover of *Khad Gadya* to true abstraction, or those who see in Lissitzky's Judaism a characteristic shared by the two kinds of work.[4] The result of trying to see everything in everything, of denying ruptures, is to deny any historic particularity: the so-called "cubism" of *Khad Gadya* is totally superficial and bears no relation to the work of Braque or Picasso whose pictorial analysis led Malevich, as early as 1915, to Suprematism. Moreover, there is in fact no reason to doubt Lissitzky's own dismissal of these early Jewish book illustrations. As his wife reported, "The little books were put away and later scarcely mentioned by Lissitzky."[5]

Yet, there remains the question of the relation between L 2 and L 3; this is much more complex than the relation (or rather, the non-relation) between L 1 and L 2. Were we to confine ourselves solely to the exhibition, without consulting the catalogue, what Nisbet did might seem quite traditional. As Benjamin Buchloh has remarked, many historians present Russian avant-garde artists of the 1920s who later worked for Stalin as "purist heroes and martyrs who had to sacrifice their commitment to the spiritual realm of abstract art by their enforced involvement with the state," and judge their works as compromises necessarily destined to failure.[6] Lissitzky is a perfect subject for this interpretation, since the events of his life seem to reinforce it. Although he was profoundly committed to the new régime, Lissitzky left Russia in 1921 for Berlin—the center of intellectual immigration—and remained in Europe until 1925. His role as intermediary between the Western and Russian avant-gardes allowed him to return to Europe often until 1927, especially since his wife, Sophie Küppers, and her two sons, had remained for a time in Germany before rejoining him in Moscow. From 1927 on, Lissitzky made only brief journeys on the occasions of his exhibition designs.

The transition from L 2 to L 3 of course did not occur precisely at the beginning of 1925, but it is easy to show that later in the 1920s, the less Lissitzky participated in the cosmopolitan German life in which he had previously been so active, the more his art became "readable." This direction was so strong that by the end of his life Lissitzky wound up producing a kind of conventional "monumental" neo-classicism. This simplification of Lissitsky's work is of course a cliché, but I do not reject it as easily as Buchloh, at least not its implied idea that Lissitzky renounced artistic experimentation in order to save his skin.[7] In fact, I rather expected to see this idea reformulated and emphasized in the catalogue.

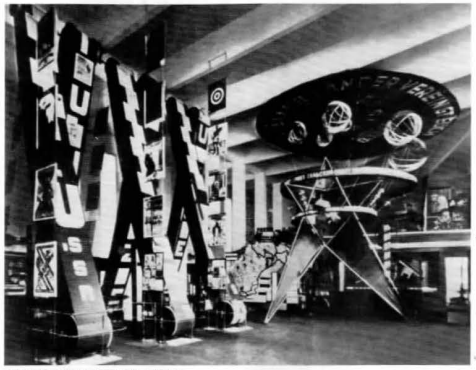
But Nisbet adopts another line of reasoning in order to exempt Lissitzky from political responsibility: Lissitzky never took politics very seriously. According to this reasoning, it was a happy coincidence that led Lissitzky to espouse the revolutionary ideal: "Lissitzky's reliance on ideas of development and change *made it easy for him* [my italics] to work with the Bolshevik government." Thus, despite the fact that "he was never a member of the Communist party . . . he was content to work for and with the government in the massive task of modernizing Russia." Although we are told that Lissitzky "emotionally linked the future of his own son, born in October 1930, to the future of the Soviet State,"[8] the revolution is treated here as an external event, "easy to cope with," and the State becomes a silent partner, for whom he was *merely* content to work.

This art-historical gambit is more subtle than the one that makes Lissitzky a martyr, since it accounts for the stylistic discontinuity demonstrated in the exhibition by Lissitzky's psychological "lack of commitment," or rather, a mere acquiescence to the circumstances of the moment. Thus we are given, for example, only a biographical explanation for Lissitzky's return to Russia

In fact, the exhibition reveals three Lissitzkys: the Chagallian Lissitzky of early 1919, the Suprematist Lissitzky of the 1920s and the "Stalinist" Lissitzky of '30s propaganda work.

(the illegality of a prolonged stay in Switzerland, the death of a sister). Yet, certainly the desire to take part in the development of Soviet culture and to share with his architect-colleagues the knowledge he acquired during his stay in Europe were as important to his decision to return.[9] Nothing is more obvious than the fact that Lissitzky was not an *apparatchik*, but if one understands by "communism as such" the dream of a classless society described in the writings of Marx, I believe that Nisbet's assertion that "Communism as such was never the real issue for Lissitzky" is false. It is easy to locate examples of Lissitzky's numerous confessions of communist faith in his public and private writings. In the Berlin lecture (1922), Lissitzky stressed his hope for the future abolishment of the division of labor (and thus of the opposition artist/non-artist, art/non-art); in his book on Soviet architecture (1930), he argued for the "socialist" elimination of the city/country dichotomy. Perusing Lissitzky's writings at random, one thus finds immediately two canonical ideas of communism since Marx's *German Ideology* and Engels's *Anti-Dühring*. It is sufficient to notice the "we" Lissitzky constantly uses when he proudly refers to the accomplishments of Soviet Russia to see that communism was not merely a secondary matter for him.[10]

Two different discourses meet here: that of the exhibition, which uses jarring contrasts to oppose the Lissitzky who created the *Prouns* (L 2) and the later, propagandist Lissitzky (L 3); and that of the catalogue, which reconciles these two faces of Lissitzky under the banner of a certain political divestment of his enterprise. These two discourses are not necessarily contradictory (they converge in a hypostasis of the *Proun* moment, which seems to me perfectly justified), but they are sufficiently distinct to point to the fact that an essential problem is not being addressed in any detail: the relation between art and politics. This lacuna explains, I believe, why the discontinuity in Lissitzky's work is so noticeable in the exhibition while it is evaded in the catalogue.



Installation view of "Pressa" exhibition, Cologne, 1928.

Lissitzky had the very distinct feeling that the Revolution was displacing the modernist paradigm he had employed, and that it required of artists new modes of production and distribution.

Just what is the place of politics in Lissitzky's work? Buchloh has attempted to give an answer by showing that a paradigm change was taking place in Russia throughout the 1920s, making obsolete the self-referentiality of the modernist position in art. Buchloh describes this paradigm change as the transition from *faktura* to factography. *Faktura* was a major pictorial concern of the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-garde. A positivist and modernist redefinition of the traditional notion of texture (which carried unacceptable connotations of subjectivity and the old masters), *faktura* emphasized the materiality of the pictorial process and mediums and conceived these aspects (e.g., the planarity of the canvas, the quality of the support, the thickness of the paint) as the "zero degree of painting." This new concept—although it was based on a belief in a sort of "science of pictorial facts," ultimately linked to the new, industrial division of labor—provided many Russian artists, Lissitzky included, with a justification for demonstrating their skills in the craft of painting. On the other hand, factography was a term first employed by the agit-prop writer Sergei Tretiakov (Brecht's translator in Russia) to describe the kind of "objective-witness journalism" he advocated as a possible replacement for (bourgeois, i.e., "subjective") literature. Factography was best employed in the visual arts in the photomontages of Lissitzky and Rodchenko, and in the films of Dziga Vertov. Related to the "new need to construct *iconic* representations for a new mass audience" (Buchloh), factography abandoned the modernist paradigm of the specificity and autonomy of the medium to reconceive the artistic practice as the visual articulation of mere "facts" registered by the "mechanical" eye of the camera. In the case of *faktura*, the work is understood as the trace of a material process (pictorial facts), whereas with factography, the work constitutes a semantization, via the contrasts of montage, of the recorded "facts" of reality. This paradigm change—from *faktura* to factography—was a direct consequence of the October Revolution; not only because revolution is one of those urgent situations during which the "detachment" of the esthetic attitude is no longer appropriate, but also because this new paradigm came out of a "crisis of audience relationships."[11] The artists of the avant-garde who wanted to support the revolution by their own means quickly understood that they had little chance of succeeding if they continued to create an art whose very self-referentiality made it totally inaccessible to the "masses" they were addressing.

Buchloh rightly insists on the very coherent diagnosis Lissitzky made of the situation. From the time of his famous 1922 lecture on Russian art, given in Berlin and Amsterdam, Lissitzky spoke of the radical change in outlook that the Revolution brought about: "Life posed questions and demanded immediate replies to them: what role does art play in the new society, in which the field of creative activity becomes common property?"[12] The answer of 1922, we shall see, still drew on the "modernist" paradigm, but from that date on Lissitzky's work reflected the fact that a change of scale had to take place since art was being confronted by the demands of a new public entirely unknown to the West. Four years later, on the verge of shifting from one paradigm to another (in 1926 he stopped painting in order to devote himself to typography and exhibition design, and Buchloh implies that the organization of the *Pressa* exhibition in 1928 was the moment when the new paradigm crystallized), Lissitzky clearly defined the new context he faced as a designer: "It is the great mass, the semi-literate mass, who have become the audience."[13] Buchloh's analysis is perfectly convincing: all the artists he considers (e.g., Lissitzky, Rodchenko, Klucis) had the very distinct feeling that the historic tumult of the Revolution was displacing the modernist tradition in which they were taking part and required new modes of production and distribution.

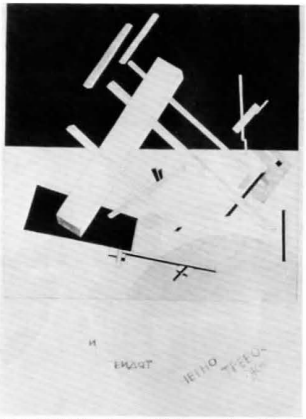
Is this to say, then, as Buchloh seems to suggest at times, that they had no other solution than to use their art to serve the political Cause *directly*? Is it to say that their formal research had to become secondary to the "program," and that the ideological level, which is connected to artistic practice, had thus to be crushed beneath the political level? Were they obliged to elaborate, by means of this purely instrumental way of conceiving art, the bases of what was to become "socialist realism"? Does this mean that the paradigm change necessarily had to lead to the glorification of Stalin in those photomontages that made him into—as Brecht would say—a "positive hero"? I believe that the exhibition answers these questions in the negative, and this is one of its greatest merits.

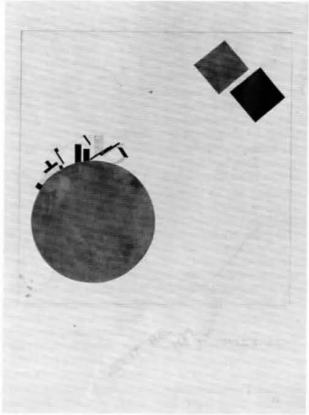
My reference here to Brecht's term is not arbitrary, for although he was largely blind to the plastic arts of the 20th century, he always emphasized, in both his theory and his theater, the impossibility of conveying a revolutionary content by means of the cathartic illusionism upon which the traditional (bourgeois) theater was based—a cathartic illusionism at work in any art form that glorifies totalitarian régimes, including Lissitzky's last works. But while Lissitzky was struggling with the difficulties of adapting the modernist paradigm to the revolutionary situation—even before his adherence to factography—he was a true Brechtian. As we know, there was nothing worse for Brecht than browbeating the spectator with a political message, or designating a hero with whom the viewer must identify. On the contrary, he felt, one must present the spectator with a riddle, give him or her the theoretical means with which to solve it, and leave it at that. It is up to the audience to find the solution, to wake to a political consciousness (if the work is actually based on a political theme, which is not always the case).

What Brecht wanted his theater to produce was the active movement that constitutes this awakening: the audience should not be engrossed in the story, but must work (with pleasure) towards solving the riddle. Without the riddle they would not have the means to link the situation described in the play with their own situation in history. In other words, theater must not be an opiate, seducing its public. Rather, the concept of distanciation and all of the discontinuities of language upon which Brecht's theater is founded, aim at the creation of a jolt that requires the viewer to constantly ask himself or herself questions, to doubt the assurance of his or her apprehension of the real.

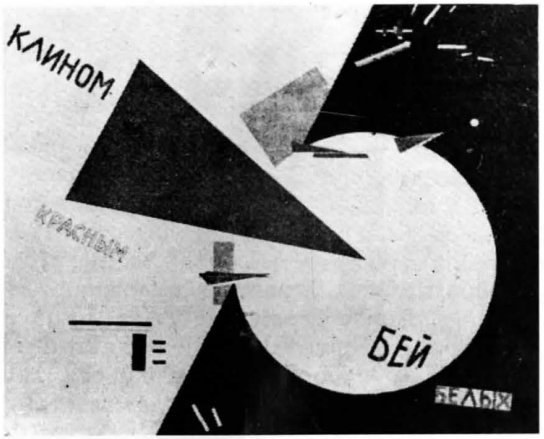
In my opinion, all of the writings produced by L 2 (that is, by the modernist inventor of the *Prouns*, the typographer and the exhibition designer, at least up to the middle of the 1920s) demonstrate a Brechtian position, and all of Lissitzky's work of this same period revolves around an eminently ideological goal, even if the political question is not directly addressed: to jar the spectator out of his or her age-old lethargy—whether by means of the *Prouns'* ambiguity, the kineticism of the exhibition designs, or the visual dynamism of the typography.[14]

I therefore propose the following thesis: there is indeed a schism between L 2 and L 3, between the "Brechtian" Lissitzky and the "Stalinist" Lissitzky (let us not get involved here in the quite complex question





Two studies for Of Two Squares, *1922. Above, graphite and black ink, 10 by 8 inches; Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University. Below, graphite and watercolor on cardboard, 10⅛ by 8 inches; Museum of Modern Art.*



Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge, ***1920, poster, approximately 20½ by 23½.***

of the relations between Brecht and Stalin). This discontinuity is not (as Nisbet suggests) found between a purely formalist position (the *Proun* as a version of art for art's sake) and a position that turns art into an instrument of propaganda for the glory of tyranny, but rather between two ways of considering the relations between art and ideology. The position of L 2 is perfectly clear in the editorial Lissitzky wrote for *Veshch* (Object), the magazine he created in 1922 in Berlin with Ilya Ehrenburg:

> *Veshch* stands equally aloof from all political parties, because it is not occupied with the problems of politics but of art. This does not mean, however, that we are in favour of an art which stands outside of life and is apolitical on principle. On the contrary, ***we cannot imagine a creation of new forms in art unrelated to the change in social form***, and it is obvious that all those in sympathy with *Veshch* belong to the new creative forces in Europe and in Russia who are creating new "objects."[15]

In other words, it is through the exploration of formal issues that art must first apprehend its ideological task in times of revolution. That task is first of all to transform the perceiving subject: any direct presentation of a political content without this attendant transformation is doomed to failure. This obviously does not mean that overt political content is in itself reprehensible, as the good old formalist doctrine would have us believe, but that the dissociation of "form" and "content" which is at the base of "socialist" realism—to use the traditional terms of esthetics and art history—appears inadequate as soon as one pays attention to the question of ideology.

Nisbet raises two points in the catalogue that demonstrate that it is not so easy to break free of traditional art history's basic apoliticism. The first concerns *Of Two Squares*, a small book for children illustrated by Lissitzky at Vitebsk in 1920, but only printed in Berlin in 1922. It depicts a red square and a black square arriving together on earth to abolish chaos and to build red clarity. Nisbet rightly opposes the traditional interpretation of this "cartoon," which regards "the red square as positive (embodying the revolution) and the black square as negative." As he notes, "the sequence of scenes makes it clear that both squares participate in affirming the new order." But the alternate reading he proposes seems to me equally erroneous: "The black square probably stands for Suprematism, the red for its development in a revolutionary, Unovisian spirit."[16] I would propose another reading. If one accepts Lissitzky's Leninism as a given (which Nisbet's own thesis—that Lissitzky had a "lack of commitment" to Soviet politics—does not allow), the black square that comes to help the red square carry out the revolution and is then expelled from the planet that has been put in order, could be a reference to the abruptly terminated anarchist movement. Although the anarchists were essential at the beginning of the October Revolution, they were later driven out in a bloody purge by the Red Army during the events of Kronstadt in March 1921.[17] Either way, it is the act of referring to real history by means of abstract figures which is interesting in *Of Two Squares*, over and above the specific political situation to which it refers. In fact, it is precisely because the scenario of this "story" is known in advance—a characteristic of the epic genre, where the emphasis on the codes is enhanced by a previous knowledge of the depicted facts—that Lissitzky is able to graft his ideological work onto the fundamentally abstract level of his semiological investigation.

My second example concerns the famous poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (unfortunately not included in the exhibition, since it appears that no original copy survives[18]). Based on the title given in an early catalogue—*On the Polish Front*—Nisbet argues that the poster was made during the summer of 1920, as "an immediate response to the Western Front in the Russo-Polish War which directly threatened the Vitebsk area."[19] In other words, this poster was produced on the occasion of an altogether circumstantial event, and does not refer, as was believed up to now, to the civil war in general (since it had already been won).

In response I would have to say that it seems difficult to believe that the word "white" had ceased to mean simply "reactionary" in the Russia of 1920—and, after all, "With the red wedge, beat the whites" is the inscription one can read on the poster. In the second place, it would greatly limit the political scope of the poster if one were to interpret it solely in terms of one particular context. Not that this context diminishes the work's political impact. I would say, on the contrary, that it accentuates it (the association of the Poles with the White Army of Wrangel gives additional semantic depth to the image), but only if we go one step further. (In the same manner, the strength of John Heartfield's photomontage, or more recently of Hans Haacke's multimedium works, depends greatly on their context-specificity, but this also accentuates their generic effect as a critique of dominant visual discourses—be it that of Nazi propaganda or of corporate use of the arts.) There is nothing wrong in pinning down a specific political context, provided that it is not given as the sole key to open the significations of a highly abstract image. This is one of the conditions of the work's stratified meanings, certainly. But one would also think that, since red and white function as emblems of revolution and reaction in general, the nature of this abstractedness itself should be scrutinized.

The attempt to depoliticize Lissitzky (L 2) by reducing his specifically political productions such as *Beat the Whites* to their local context can only wind up at an impasse, since such an approach remains purely iconological. In fact, only a "rhetorical" analysis can truly account for the various semantic levels of these works and their ideology (and, inversely, show the ideological functioning of the "non-political" works). Such an analysis was attempted by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, specifically in relation to *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*. Lyotard compared Lissitzky's

The Factory Workbenches Await You, ***1919–20, propaganda board in Vitebsk.***

The political efficacy of *Beat the Whites* is not to be sought in its specific political context, but in the way it subverts the codes it uses, which are receptacles of a certain ideological investment.

poster to another Soviet poster of the same year, but one which anticipates the codes of "socialist realism." The proto-socialist-realist image, which is dominated by the text and drawn in perspective, depicts workers with whom the spectator is supposed to identify. Lyotard writes that it

> appeals to an experience which already has its title, its words: work as a struggle against matter, the workers' collective as an active subject, [which] prohibits the social space from being criticized in any and all of its dimensions. Entire areas of experience are sheltered from critical scrutiny; further, they are proposed as areas for the investment of desire, and their representation is used to incite the readers of the poster to a behavior that reproduces this experience.[20]

Using Freudian terminology, Lyotard sees in this type of image an ideological attempt at harmonizing the "reality principle" and the "pleasure principle"; that is, by portraying work as a joyous celebration, one wants to motivate the workers to work overtime. The mechanism of positive identification (which Brecht, for example, avoided at all costs) can only work by creating an illusion. There is no such illusion in *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*: the deconstruction of the oriented space of writing by that of the figure, and vice versa, physically disorients the spectator, and forces him or her into a relationship with the image that is no longer passive. Here, according to Lyotard,

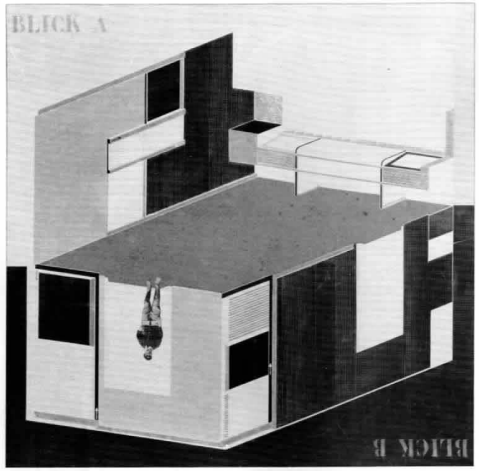
> Desire cannot lose itself in an object or in a discourse where it can be fulfilled; it encounters a screen and is reflected in it. . . . The poster turns desire back in upon itself as flesh, as an area of rhythms, contours, colors. It fails to objectify and identify the object. Plastic space becomes a space of 'anguish.'[21]

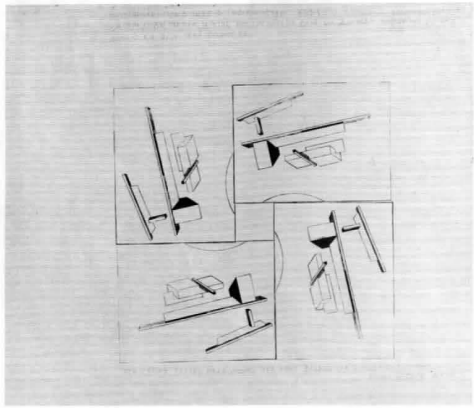
It is not possible to quote here Lyotard's entire, very dense formal analysis, which uses the Freudian concept of the death drive to characterize Lissitzky's "plastic space." It can be summarized by saying that the dissociation between the pleasure principle and the reality principle operating in *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* is characteristic of utopia, that is, of a radical critique of the social order:

> To beat the whites with the red wedge is not only to win the civil war, improve the economy, and build collectivism; it is also to force the wedge into all the white zones of experience and ideology, of the established. It is to submit all social, political, moral and esthetic givens to the same reversal that desire undergoes in the poster. The closed, all-enveloping roundness of white investment must everywhere be opened and pierced by red sharpness.[22]

In other words, this poster's political efficacy is not to be sought solely in its explicit content, but in the way it subverts the codes it uses, which are receptacles of ideological investment. Every utopia provides a telescoping of two spaces: "Utopia here," writes Lyotard, "is the creative act which transgresses the proscription, makes possible the interrelationship of two heterogeneous spaces [that of writing, usually oriented from left to right; that of the figure, usually keyed to a gravitational orientation], which makes possible the spiritual respiration of the revolution, without which it would only be a reassuring revolution, linear in its search for truth and justice."

The efficacy of *Beat the Whites* or *Of Two Squares* did not come easily. The *Proun* of 1919–20 at the entrance of a factory in Vitebsk with the slogan "The Factory Workbenches Await You" is the Suprematist version of the proto-socialist-realist poster Lyotard refers to. Critics explain its weakness by the fact that Lissitzky's acceptance of Malevich's influence was still overwhelming (Malevich himself is responsible for an equally naive "political" poster that mechanically combines a Suprematist composition with a slogan, without any apparent relation between the two).[23] But Lyotard's analysis gives the key to the failure of *The Factory Workbenches Await You*: in the two works described above—the poster and the book—Lissitzky scrambles the codes of writing and figuration; in this work, howev-





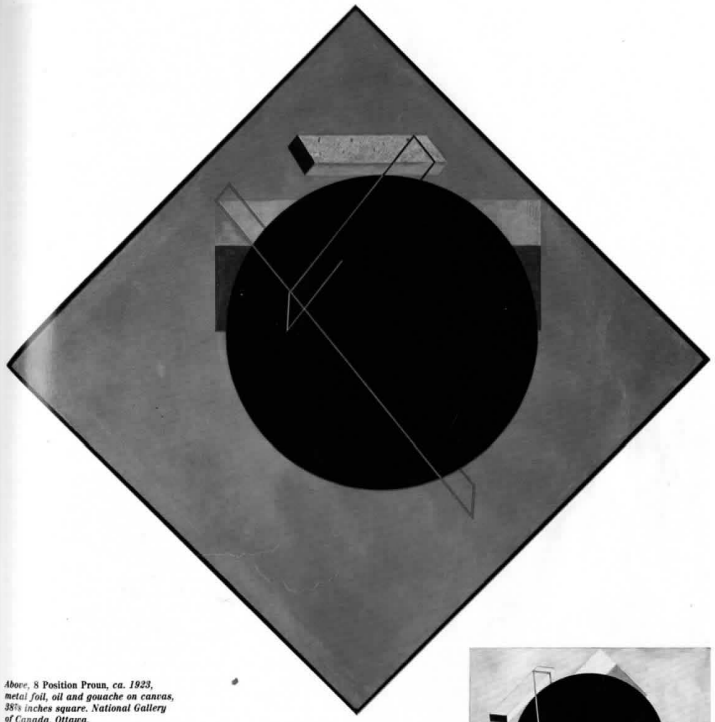
For Lissitzky, axonometry eliminated all reference to the spectator's point of view. Liberating the viewer from gravity, he hoped, would lead to the foundering of the whole system of perception.

er, he merely reuses a composition from one of his first *Prouns* (*The Town*) onto which he literally overlays, in a static and perfunctory typography, the Leninist slogan about the return to work.

No utopic desire animates this factory board, and it remains ineffective. But its lack of conviction attests to the difficulty of the fundamental theoretical question Lissitzky was then trying to answer: is it possible to transmit something like a proposition exclusively by means of an image?

Alan Birnholz has proposed that military maps, still popular in Russia after the war years, played an important part in the development of *Beat the Whites*.[24] This example suggests how Lissitzky recuperated a certain modernist idea of a grammar of forms and radically subverted it. As it happens, the military map was also the very example that Mondrian chose when he wanted to demonstrate that "abstract representations can move us deeply." As he wrote in *De Stijl* in 1919, "An example I recollect was a film early in the war showing a large part of the world in map form. Upon this, the invading German forces suddenly appeared as *small cubes*. Likewise a counterforce appeared, the Allies, also as *small cubes*. In this way the worldwide cataclysm was actually *expressed* in all its vastness, rather than in parts or details as a naturalistic portrayal would have shown it."[25] In a similar way, the (opposite) idea that the proposition can be an image came to Wittgenstein when he was looking at a diagram that was supposed to map out an automobile accident.[26]

When Lissitzky compared his *Prouns* to geographical maps in 1921, he said, "When we saw that the content of our canvas was no longer a pictorial one, that it had now begun to rotate, even though, for the moment, it was like a geographical map . . . and remained hanging on the wall—we decided to give it an appropriate name. We called it PROUN."[27] Two ideas meet here, and they must be analyzed more closely: the affirmation of the reversibility of the *Prouns*, and the consequent condem-

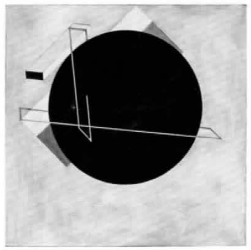


Above, 8 Position Proun, *ca. 1923, metal foil, oil and gouache on canvas, 38⅞ inches square. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.*

Right, Proun, *India ink, gouache and graphite, 9¹¹⁄₁₆ by 9¹⁹⁄₁₆ inches. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.*

Opposite top, rendering of the Abstract Cabinet *in the Provinzialmuseum, Hannover, 1926–27, gouache and collage, 15½ by 20½ inches. Sprengel Museum, Hannover.*

Opposite bottom, Construction Floating in Space, *ca. 1920, lithograph with graphite annotations, 19½ by 20 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Germán Jiménez, Caracas.*



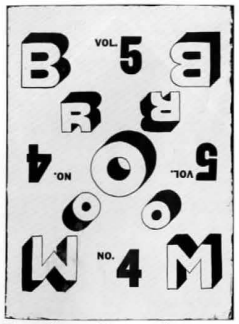
nation of the tradition that would have a map hung vertically on a wall, when it should be unfolded on a table in order to function as a working model.

Lissitzky's geographical metaphor demonstrates his very personal interpretation of Malevich's Suprematism, an interpretation which, it seems to me, allows us to perceive a trait common to Lissitzky's varied production of the early 1920s. As of 1921, Lissitzky criticized Suprematism in these terms: "For all its revolutionary force, the Suprematist canvas remained in the form of a picture. Like any canvas in a museum, it possessed one specific perpendicular axis (vis-à-vis the horizon), and when it was hung any other way it looked as if it were sideways or upside down."[28]

Although this reproach is not entirely justified (the black square is completely reversible, and this accounts in part for its strength; and Malevich was sufficiently interested in the question to attempt new ways of hanging—on the ceiling, for example),[29] it must be seen in light of another text of Lissitzky's. Written three years later, in 1924, *Art and Pangeometry* has been cited by Kenneth Frampton as "the central text to [Lissitzky's] theoretical thought."[30] In it, Lissitzky wrote:

> Supremacism has advanced the ultimate tip of the visual pyramid of perspective to infinity. It has broken through the "blue lampshade of the firmament." For the colour of space, it has taken not the single *blue* ray of the spectrum, but the whole unity—the *white*. Supremacist space may be formed not only forward from the plane but also backward in depth. If we indicate the flat surface of the picture as 0, we can describe the direction in depth by — (negative) and the forward direction by + (positive) or the other way around.[31]

The diagram that accompanies this passage opposes the monocular perspective of the Renaissance to axonometric projection, frequently used in architecture today, in which receding lines remain parallel and do not meet in a vanishing point. In the kind of Hegelian dialectic taking place in this text, where different systems of space configuration successively negate and surpass one another throughout the ages, axonometry (affiliated here with Suprematism) is seen as the *Aufhebung* (sublation) of monocular perspective. Rather than the metaphorical representation, by means of a vanishing point, of an unrepresentable infinity (only God is infinite), axonometry makes one reflect on (and no longer *see*) infinity: it suppresses and encompasses perspective as a limited possibility, just as white—sum total of the colors of the spectrum—encompasses and suppresses blue.



Typographic cover of Broom *magazine, November 1923, vol. 5, no. 4. Courtesy Ex Libris, New York.*

Lissitzky moved from a simple intensification of the plus/minus effect of axonometry to the radical reversibility and spatial disorientation of works such as the cover that he designed for "Broom."

Malevich, with very few exceptions, never used axonometry in his paintings and never concerned himself with representing volumes. His art is entirely planimetrical; the works he presented in the 1915 exhibition *0.10* (Suprematism's veritable birth date), for instance, have titles such as *Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension*, or *Color Masses in the Second Dimension*—that is, everything but the third dimension. If Lissitzky, then, invoked axonometry in relation to Suprematism, it was to refer to his personal contribution: axonometry was for him one of the occurrences of the *zero* that Malevich wanted to magnify in his art (Malevich's texts are filled with such statements as "I have transformed myself into the zero of forms").

Art and Pangeometry presents itself in fact as an analysis of the links between mathematics (or rather, numbering systems) and art; and Lissitzky first and foremost related Suprematism to the positional numbering system. In this system, which is the one we use today, but which was invented by Indian Buddhism, zero plays a major role.[32] Lissitzky described Suprematism as a *positional* system whose principal element is the color plane: "New optical discoveries have taught us that two areas of different intensities, even when they are lying in one plane, are grasped by the mind as being at different distances from the eye." This first interpretation of the "Suprematist zero" is particularly astute: Malevich's paintings play on the optical properties of color and on the overlapping of planes to give the illusion of indefinite depth. The second interpretation Lissitzky offers is entirely orthodox. It is the typically modernist reading of the square as the zero degree or the irreducible essence of painting, as the apotheosis of flatness; it is the commonplace of the *Black Square* as the last painting, as the apogee of self-referentiality. But it is in his third way of conceiving the Malevichian zero that Lissitzky touches upon his own work, that is, both upon axonometry and reversibility.

This is not the place to examine in detail Lissitzky's conception of the perspective/axonometry opposition. Let us say, for brevity's sake, that the latter system of spatial representation eliminated all reference to a spectator's *point of view* (corresponding specularly to a vanishing point), and that this liberation would lead to an overall foundering of perception. Not only would lines parallel one another endlessly forwards and backwards, but the perceptual security that the illusionist system of perspective affords by repressing the basic ambiguity of any visual apprehension of depth would be deconstructed, giving way to an ambiguity that would force the spectator to make constant decisions about how to interpret what he or she sees: is this figure hollow or in relief?

The protension/retention, or plus/minus effect of axonometry is intensified in almost all of the *Prouns*.[33] In Lissitzky's Brechtian fight against the catharsis and the illusion of identification that, according to Lissitzky, characterized bourgeois art, axonometry appeared as an ideal weapon.[34] He became aware of its formal possibilities gradually: his first *Prouns* are spare, and axonometry is used in an orthodox way (as in architec-

In the Studio, *ca. 1923, photograph, 4¼ by 3 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

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Proun ceases to be a picture and turns into a structure round which we must circle, looking at it from all sides, peering down from above, investigating from below. The result is that the one axis of the picture which stood at right angles to the horizontal was destroyed. Circling round it, we screw ourselves into the space.... We have set the *Proun* in motion so we obtain a number of axes of projection.[35]

This passage is important because it reveals how Lissitzky moved from a simple intensification of the plus/minus effect inherent to axonometry to the concept of radical reversibility. He wanted to destroy the spectator's certainty and the usual viewing position: facing the painting, facing the horizon. This position is clearly anthropomorphic. It is linked to our standing on the ground, to our submission to the law of gravity; it is the plastic manifestation of the rationalist philosophy of conscience (the bourgeois philosophy of the subject which Lissitzky associates with monocular perspective). Thus, in order to "liberate us from the horizon of forms," as Malevich would say, it is necessary to destroy this vis-à-vis relationship, which is the cause of the spectator's contemplative attitude in front of pictorial works. In order to conceive the painting as an abstract model, we must cut all connection with phenomenal space, with the space of the world which is oriented around and from the pole of our bodies. "To invert an object is to take away its significance," says the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (who uses as an example the grotesque image of a face turned upside down).[36] In his *Prouns*, Lissitzky wanted to invent a space in which orientation is deliberately abolished: the viewer should no longer have a base of operations, but must be made continually to choose the coordinates of his or her visual field, which thereby become variable.

At his request, Lissitzky's paintings were often reproduced in different positions and at least one painting refers to this reversibility in its title: the famous *8 Position Proun*, 1923. This large square painting can be viewed either orthogonally (any one of its sides functioning as a base) or like one of Mondrian's lozenge paintings (standing on any one of its four points). Although *8 Position Proun* was not in the exhibition (it was represented by a small sketch), Nisbet clearly understands Lissitzky's interest in reversibility because he did include several works which demonstrate it directly: 1) Lissitzky's 1920 graphic experiment in which he printed the same lithograph four times on the same sheet of paper, but in four different positions, so that the image seems to turn around a central pivot;[37] 2) the lithograph from the *First Proun Portfolio*, based on the same image, with its number (P 1) indicated on all four sides;[38] 3) the tondo from the *First Proun Portfolio* and its preliminary sketch (both of which were included in the exhibition), which Lissitzky arranged in different positions;[39] and 4) one of the multiple-exposure photographs mentioned above (*In the Studio*, ca. 1923), which groups together, head to foot, several figures, including Lissitzky, thus literally carrying out the inversion posited by Merleau-Ponty as the threshold of human perception.

Nowhere is the association of axonometry with this radical reversibility demonstrated so clearly as it is in the drawings that were meant to be a posteriori records of Lissitzky's exhibition designs (and one could show indeed that the question of the ambiguity of perception is fundamental for all his exhibition designs, as if Lissitzky had attempted to work out in "real space" the problematic of reversibility he had set forth in his *Prouns*. I will leave this topic at that, however, preferring to concentrate on the objects which were presented in the Harvard show). In *Proun Room* (1923), one of the lithographs from the *First Kestner Portfolio*, the walls of the room undergo such a topological transformation that the positive and negative spaces constantly reverse one another. The same thing occurs in Lissitzky's representation of the Hannover *Abstract Cabinet* (1927). This image must be turned upside down in order for the bottom part to be read correctly (during this operation of inversion, not only does the positive space become negative, but we also see just how ambiguous the spectator's position on the ground is—this upside-down/right-side-up figure is incorporated in the representation through photocollage). This oscillation of a plane in opposite directions, its change from bi- to tridimensionality and back again, is essential to the *Proun*, and it occurs in almost all of those presented in the exhibition. The effect is based, as Lissitzky suggested, on the multiplication of projection axes, which greatly increases the protension/retension effect characteristic of axonometry.

These efforts toward a radical reversibility are related to Lissitzky's invective against the tradition of the museum. In a letter of 1923 to Sophie, he wrote:

> You go on to enquire on which wall you should hang my work.... When I made my Proun, I did not think of filling one of these surfaces with yet another decorative patch. You should be treating the problem in quite the right manner, as prescribed by common sense, if you wanted to order a cupboard for these documents of my work. Subsequently, labels will be attached to them, indicating to what sphere of human activity these documents belong and in which year these documents originated. You say that we are hung on walls in museums? It is not my fault that the museum directors are convinced of the perpetual infallibility of their own spectacle lenses so that it never occurs to them to devise another method of exhibiting.[40]

Lissitzky's critique, which on the surface relates to museum practices, involves something much more fundamental: the change of status he conceived for his *Prouns*. They were no longer paintings, but *documents*, and they should be conserved as such, that is, horizontally. This horizontality was of course another inversion of the vis-à-vis position he had criticized (he no doubt realized the phenomenological implications of this even as a student, when he began drawing on an architect's table). Lissitzky directly linked horizontality to the spatial disorientation of his work of the early 1920s in the cover that he designed for *Broom*, where the title is repeated upside down: "The fact that magazines frequently lie on the table with their titles upside down gave Lissitzky the idea," his wife noted.[41]

This shift, from the verticality of the painting to the horizontality of the document, is where I would locate the paradigm change in Lissitzky's work. This change is identical to the transformation Leo Steinberg saw 20 years ago in the work of Rauschenberg. This same shift, I believe, is essential to many radical experiments of this century, including Cubism, the works of Mondrian and Pollock, and the best Minimalist works.[42] I would even say that the paradigm change that Buchloh describes is merely a *surface effect* of the one I am trying to articulate. For Steinberg, it will be recalled, Rauschenberg's paintings are "flatbeds," that is, surfaces similar to "tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which *information* may be perceived, printed, impressed." These "flatbeds" do not offer a "conception of the picture as representing a world, some sort of worldspace which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture"; they are "no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.... The horizontality of the bed relates to *making* as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane relates to *seeing*."[43] This is the status that Lissitzky wanted to assign to his *Prouns*.

In order to fully understand Lissitzky, one must return to his interpretation of the "Malevichian zero." Lissitzky often used numbers as metaphors in his texts. His 1922 lecture is a well-known example of this. In it, he writes:

> In 1913 Malevich exhibited a black square painted on a white canvas. Here a form was displayed which was opposed to everything that was understood by "pictures" or "painting" or "art." Its creator wanted to reduce all forms, all paintings to zero. For us, however, this zero was the turning-point. When we have a series of numbers coming from: infinity... 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0... it comes right down to the 0, then begins the ascending line 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6... These lines are ascending, but already from the other side of the picture.[44]

This text continues, but a prior version, because it includes a diagram, makes Lissitzky's ideas clearer:

> Certainly, this series ascends, but on the other side of painting as such. If people once said that time had brought painting to the square in order that it would perish there [this is the theme of the black square as the last painting], we have said: if the slab of the square has blocked up the narrowing channel of painterly culture [this is a reference to perspective], its reverse serves as the foundation for a new, volumetrical growth of the concrete world.[45]

The diagram that accompanies this text refers to the *Proun* as a sign of the world to come, as an epistemological model of the new society to be built (the subject of Lissitzky's writings). If "minus infinity" refers to the absence of a *point of view* in the disanthropomorphized space of axonometry, "plus infinity" refers to the potentiality of the world to be invented, to the material culture to be shaped. Lissitzky considered his *Prouns* documents because they were, for him, blueprints for action, charts for a strategy to be adopted in order to transform society. This may appear to contradict the theory that the *Prouns* intensify perceptive ambiguity, but I do not think this is the case: they must be considered as abstract models of radical freedom and, as such, their task on the ideological and theoretical levels is to fight against dogmatism and catharsis; on the pictorial level, this task becomes the deconstruction of perceptive illusionism.

It is obvious that the transition from a pictorial culture to a material culture is problematic; all of the difficulties encountered by Soviet artists, and described by Buchloh, attest to this. In one sense, it is perhaps because they failed to differentiate the actual theoretical level from its material "applications," ultimately denying the ideological specificity of theoretical work as Lissitzky understood it in his *Prouns*, that the Soviet artists of the 1930s (Lissitzky included) moved progressively from factography to the most cathartic kind of "socialist realism." This issue is of course extraordinarily complex, and would require a long analysis dealing with that other type of instrumentalization of art with which Lissitzky got momentarily involved, to his general dissatisfaction, i.e., advertisements for industrial products (of German capitalist firms). To put it briefly, I would say that as long as Lissitzky kept intact the utopian force of his (political) desire, he was able to make full use of the *Proun* principle as a theoretical model for all his works (even in the propagandist ones, such as *Beat the Whites*, and even in the factographic photomontages). But as soon as the circumstances closed off his utopian impulse, he had no other possibility than to give full reign to the "principle of reality." The shifting ambiguity of the *Proun* model, which had operated at a theoretical level, could no longer function as the counterforce of the pleasure principle; positive heroes had to replace questioning riddles.

But the Lissitzky of the early 1920s had not yet arrived at this point: all his texts emphasize the *semiological* (or, as he himself said, *symbolic*) status of the *Prouns*. They are not directly applicable architectural projects, but analytical investigations from which such projects could be developed: this is the meaning of his famous statement about the *Proun* as an "interchange station between painting and architecture."[46] This does not mean looking—as some art historians do—for the way Lissitzky imitates his own paintings in this area of his production. The indirect relations between the *Prouns* and Lissitzky's work on exhibition design and typography are more striking examples of how he transferred, *without copying them*, the principles (and not the forms) he elaborated in his painting.

In his essay, Buchloh notes that in 1920 Soviet artists "did not depart much further from the modernist frameworks of bourgeois aesthetics than the point of establishing models of epistemological and semiotic critique. No matter how radical, these were at best no more than a negation of the perceptual conventions by which art had previously been produced and received."[47] Yet, I am not certain that what Buchloh describes is such a minor accomplishment. I am also not certain that art can aspire to anything else. Thus, I would depart here from Buchloh's interpretation, and place the paradigm change in Lissitzky's work on the theoretical level of a critique of the sign.

Lissitzky saw a changing status for the "Prouns": they were no longer just paintings, but documents to be used horizontally. This shift from vertical to horizontal is where the paradigm changes.

This does not prohibit Lissitzky's art from tackling political questions (*Beat the Whites* proves this, as do many of his typographical works). In other words, if the factography exemplified in the photomontages of the 1928 *Pressa* exhibition ultimately "turn[ed] into the sheer adulation of totalitarian power," it is perhaps because the artists Buchloh refers to, including Lissitzky, eventually renounced this epistemological ambition and attempted to turn art into a mere tool, that is, into a non-critical artifact, serving the established power.

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tural rendering), that is, only one projection axis is chosen for the depth dimension. But from 1921 on—and this evolution could be seen quite clearly in the Harvard exhibition—this rationalizing unification was rejected and replaced by an overall confusion in the visual field (it is true that there is a return to less complex compositions around 1924):

> We saw that the surface of the *Proun* ceases to be a picture and turns into a structure round which we must circle, looking at it from all sides, peering down from above, investigating from below. The result is that the one axis of the picture which stood at right angles to the horizontal was destroyed. Circling round it, we screw ourselves into the space.... We have set the *Proun* in motion so we obtain a number of axes of projection.[35]

This passage is important because it reveals how Lissitzky moved from a simple intensification of the plus/minus effect inherent to axonometry to the concept of radical reversibility. He wanted to destroy the spectator's certainty and the usual viewing position: facing the painting, facing the horizon. This position is clearly anthropomorphic. It is linked to our standing on the ground, to our submission to the law of gravity; it is the plastic manifestation of the rationalist philosophy of conscience (the bourgeois philosophy of the subject which Lissitzky associates with monocular perspective). Thus, in order to "liberate us from the horizon of forms," as Malevich would say, it is necessary to destroy this vis-à-vis relationship, which is the cause of the spectator's contemplative attitude in front of pictorial works. In order to conceive the painting as an abstract model, we must cut all connection with phenomenal space, with the space of the world which is oriented around and from the pole of our bodies. "To invert an object is to take away its significance," says the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (who uses as an example the grotesque image of a face turned upside down).[36] In his *Prouns*, Lissitzky wanted to invent a space in which orientation is deliberately abolished: the viewer should no longer have a base of operations, but must be made continually to choose the coordinates of his or her visual field, which thereby become variable.

At his request, Lissitzky's paintings were often reproduced in different positions and at least one painting refers to this reversibility in its title: the famous *8 Position Proun*, 1923. This large square painting can be viewed either orthogonally (any one of its sides functioning as a base) or like one of Mondrian's lozenge paintings (standing on any one of its four points). Although *8 Position Proun* was not in the exhibition (it was represented by a small sketch), Nisbet clearly understands Lissitzky's interest in reversibility because he did include several works which demonstrate it directly: 1) Lissitzky's 1920 graphic experiment in which he printed the same lithograph four times on the same sheet of paper, but in four different positions, so that the image seems to turn around a central pivot;[37] 2) the lithograph from the *First Proun Portfolio*, based on the same image, with its number (P 1) indicated on all four sides;[38] 3) the tondo from the *First Proun Portfolio* and its preliminary sketch (both of which were included in the exhibition), which Lissitzky arranged in different positions;[39] and 4) one of the multiple-exposure photographs mentioned above (*In the Studio*, ca. 1923), which groups together, head to foot, several figures, including Lissitzky, thus literally carrying out the inversion posited by Merleau-Ponty as the threshold of human perception.

Nowhere is the association of axonometry with this radical reversibility demonstrated so clearly as it is in the drawings that were meant to be a posteriori records of Lissitzky's exhibition designs (and one could show indeed that the question of the ambiguity of perception is fundamental for all his exhibition designs, as if Lissitzky had attempted to work out in "real space" the problematic of reversibility he had set forth in his *Prouns*. I will leave this topic at that, however, preferring to concentrate on the objects which were presented in the Harvard show). In *Proun Room* (1923), one of the lithographs from the *First Kestner Portfolio*, the walls of the room undergo such a topological transformation that the positive and negative spaces constantly reverse one another. The same thing occurs in Lissitzky's representation of the Hannover *Abstract Cabinet* (1927). This image must be turned upside down in order for the bottom part to be read correctly (during this operation of inversion, not only does the positive space become negative, but we also see just how ambiguous the spectator's position on the ground is—this upside-down/right-side-up figure is incorporated in the representation through photocollage). This oscillation of a plane in opposite directions, its change from bi- to tridimensionality and back again, is essential to the *Proun*, and it occurs in almost all of those presented in the exhibition. The effect is based, as Lissitzky suggested, on the multiplication of projection axes, which greatly increases the protension/retension effect characteristic of axonometry.

These efforts toward a radical reversibility are related to Lissitzky's invective against the tradition of the museum. In a letter of 1923 to Sophie, he wrote:

> You go on to enquire on which wall you should hang my work.... When I made my Proun, I did not think of filling one of these surfaces with yet another decorative patch. You should be treating the problem in quite the right manner, as prescribed by common sense, if you wanted to order a cupboard for these documents of my work. Subsequently, labels will be attached to them, indicating to what sphere of human activity these documents belong and in which year these documents originated. You say that we are hung on walls in museums? It is not my fault that the museum directors are convinced of the perpetual infallibility of their own spectacle lenses so that it never occurs to them to devise another method of exhibiting.[40]

Lissitzky's critique, which on the surface relates to museum practices, involves something much more fundamental: the change of status he conceived for his *Prouns*. They were no longer paintings, but *documents*, and they should be conserved as such, that is, horizontally. This horizontality was of course another inversion of the vis-à-vis position he had criticized (he no doubt realized the phenomenological implications of this even as a student, when he began drawing on an architect's table). Lissitzky directly linked horizontality to the spatial disorientation of his work of the early 1920s in the cover that he designed for *Broom*, where the title is repeated upside down: "The fact that magazines frequently lie on the table with their titles upside down gave Lissitzky the idea," his wife noted.[41]

This shift, from the verticality of the painting to the horizontality of the document, is where I would locate the paradigm change in Lissitzky's work. This change is identical to the transformation Leo Steinberg saw 20 years ago in the work of Rauschenberg. This same shift, I believe, is essential to many radical experiments of this century, including Cubism, the works of Mondrian and Pollock, and the best Minimalist works.[42] I would even say that the paradigm change that Buchloh describes is merely a *surface effect* of the one I am trying to articulate. For Steinberg, it will be recalled, Rauschenberg's paintings are "flatbeds," that is, surfaces similar to "tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which *information* may be perceived, printed, impressed." These "flatbeds" do not offer a "conception of the picture as representing a world, some sort of worldspace which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture"; they are "no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.... The horizontality of the bed relates to *making* as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane relates to *seeing*."[43] This is the status that Lissitzky wanted to assign to his *Prouns*.

In order to fully understand Lissitzky, one must return to his interpretation of the "Malevichian zero." Lissitzky often used numbers as metaphors in his texts. His 1922 lecture is a well-known example of this. In it, he writes:

> In 1913 Malevich exhibited a black square painted on a white canvas. Here a form was displayed which was opposed to everything that was understood by "pictures" or "painting" or "art." Its creator wanted to reduce all forms, all paintings to zero. For us, however, this zero was the turning-point. When we have a series of numbers coming from: infinity ... 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0 ... it comes right down to the 0, then begins the ascending line 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 ... These lines are ascending, but already from the other side of the picture.[44]

This text continues, but a prior version, because it includes a diagram, makes Lissitzky's ideas clearer:

> Certainly, this series ascends, but on the other side of painting as such. If people once said that time had brought painting to the square in order that it would perish there [this is the theme of the black square as the last painting], we have said: if the slab of the square has blocked up the narrowing channel of painterly culture [this is a reference to perspective], its reverse serves as the foundation for a new, volumetrical growth of the concrete world.[45]

The diagram that accompanies this text refers to the *Proun* as a sign of the world to come, as an epistemological model of the new society to be built (the subject of Lissitzky's writings). If "minus infinity" refers to the absence of a *point of view* in the disanthropomorphized space of axonometry, "plus infinity" refers to the potentiality of the world to be invented, to the material culture to be shaped. Lissitzky considered his *Prouns* documents because they were, for him, blueprints for action, charts for a strategy to be adopted in order to transform society. This may appear to contradict the theory that the *Prouns* intensify perceptive ambiguity, but I do not think this is the case: they must be considered as abstract models of radical freedom and, as such, their task on the ideological and theoretical levels is to fight against dogmatism and catharsis; on the pictorial level, this task becomes the deconstruction of perceptive illusionism.

It is obvious that the transition from a pictorial culture to a material culture is problematic; all of the difficulties encountered by Soviet artists, and described by Buchloh, attest to this. In one sense, it is perhaps because they failed to differentiate the actual theoretical level from its material "applications," ultimately denying the ideological specificity of theoretical work as Lissitzky understood it in his *Prouns*, that the Soviet artists of the 1930s (Lissitzky included) moved progressively from factography to the most cathartic kind of "socialist realism." This issue is of course extraordinarily complex, and would require a long analysis dealing with that other type of instrumentalization of art with which Lissitzky got momentarily involved, to his general dissatisfaction, i.e., advertisements for industrial products (of German capitalist firms). To put it briefly, I would say that as long as Lissitzky kept intact the utopian force of his (political) desire, he was able to make full use of the *Proun* principle as a theoretical model for all his works (even in the propagandist ones, such as *Beat the Whites*, and even in the factographic photomontages). But as soon as the circumstances closed off his utopian impulse, he had no other possibility than to give full reign to the "principle of reality." The shifting ambiguity of the *Proun* model, which had operated at a theoretical level, could no longer function as the counterforce of the pleasure principle; positive heroes had to replace questioning riddles.

But the Lissitzky of the early 1920s had not yet arrived at this point: all his texts emphasize the *semiological* (or, as he himself said, *symbolic*) status of the *Prouns*. They are not directly applicable architectural projects, but analytical investigations from which such projects could be developed: this is the meaning of his famous statement about the *Proun* as an "interchange station between painting and architecture."[46] This does not mean looking—as some art historians do—for the way Lissitzky imitates his own paintings in this area of his production. The indirect relations between the *Prouns* and Lissitzky's work on exhibition design and typography are more striking examples of how he transferred, *without copying them*, the principles (and not the forms) he elaborated in his painting.

In his essay, Buchloh notes that in 1920 Soviet artists "did not depart much further from the modernist frameworks of bourgeois aesthetics than the point of establishing models of epistemological and semiotic critique. No matter how radical, these were at best no more than a negation of the perceptual conventions by which art had previously been produced and received."[47] Yet, I am not certain that what Buchloh describes is such a minor accomplishment. I am also not certain that art can aspire to anything else. Thus, I would depart here from Buchloh's interpretation, and place the paradigm change in Lissitzky's work on the theoretical level of a critique of the sign.

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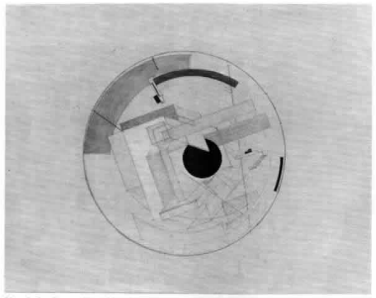
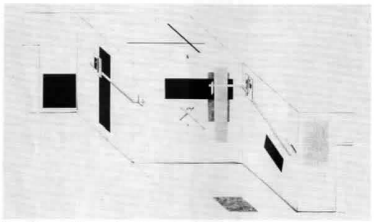
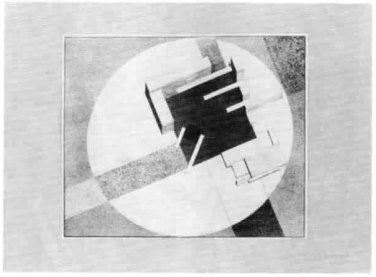


Sketch for Proun 6B, ***1920–21, gouache and graphite, 13½ by 17½ inches. © 1981 George Costakis. Collection George Costakis, Athens.***



Proun Raum, ***1923, one of six lithographs from the*** **First Kestner Portfolio,** ***24 by 17 inches. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.***



Proun 1E (Town), ***1921, lithograph from the*** **First Proun Portfolio,** ***13½ by 18 inches. © 1981 George Costakis. Collection George Costakis, Athens.***

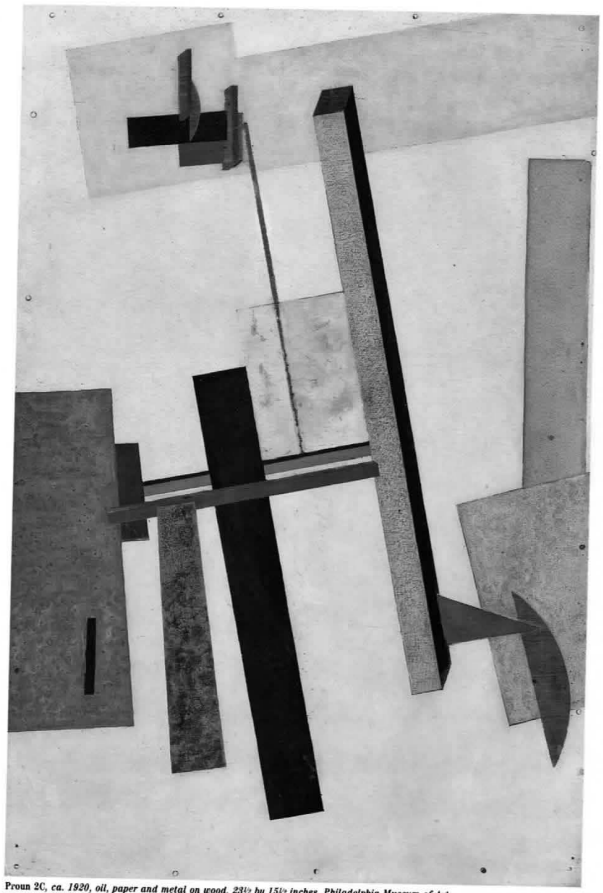
All Lissitzky's writings emphasize the semiological status of the "Prouns"—not as fully realizable architectural projects, but investigations for rethinking future practice.

of shiny paper.) Who would have suspected from a simple reproduction, even in color, the textural diversity of *Proun 2C* (ca. 1920), in which the wooden support sometimes appears as wood, and sometimes is treated to look like daub; in which glued pieces of paper or metal adopt all the characteristics of construction materials (the friable dullness of plaster, cement bubbles, the roughness of concrete, etc.)?

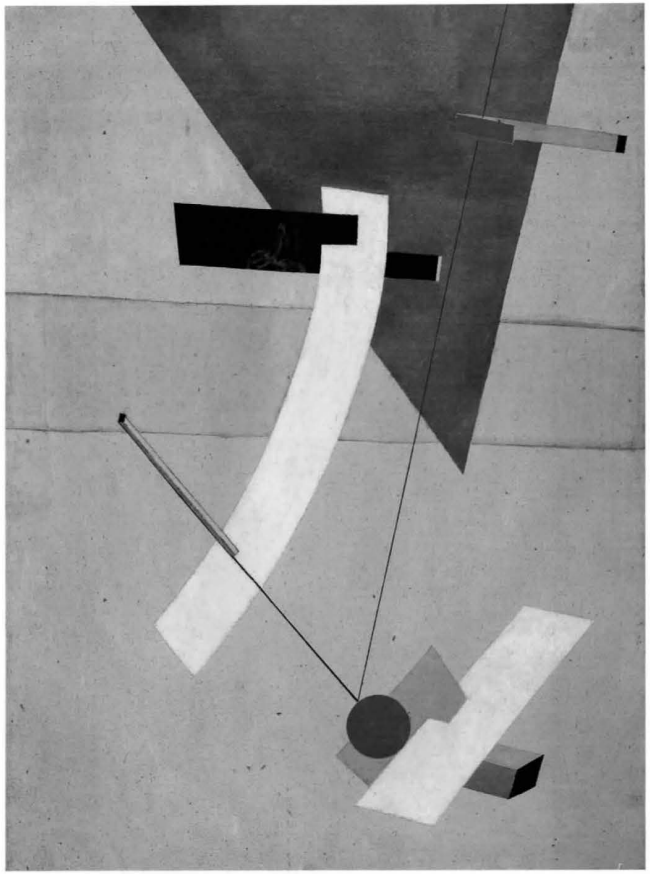
Lissitzky stated his position on the role he assigned to this materiological investigation in an enigmatic passage from the preface to the portfolio *Victory over the Sun*:

> The colours of the individual sections of these pages are to be regarded in the same way as in my Proun works, as equivalent to materials; that is to say, when the designs are put into effect, the red, yellow or black parts of the puppets are not painted correspondingly, but rather are they made in corresponding material, for example in bright copper, dull iron, and so on.[48]

Obviously we must not take Lissitzky literally here. The *Prouns* were not made like this. The colors, as signs of materials, are in fact signs in the second degree, signs of signs (the materials they "represent" are the sign of the possibility of the transition from pictorial culture to material culture, not a preliminary representation of its actualization). Lissitzky's genius as a craftsman, his obvious interest in supports of all kinds (for example, the grains of sandpaper that are dyed the color of lead on the invitation to one of his Berlin exhibitions) were not diminished when he adhered to the codes of "socialist realism": the cover of the report of the Seventh Congress of Soviets, mentioned above, is a masterpiece of binding in which a metallic imprint of a machine design frames a photomontage of glorified workers. But by their abandonment of any distinction between the sign and its referent (the color of metal referring directly to metallurgy and thus to heavy industry), these late technical virtuosities become mere exercises of style, whose connotations of luxury were meant to mask the terrible economic difficulties Russia was facing at the time. Material lost the richness of its connotative possibilities when it was subjected to the monolithic nature of Stalinist



Proun 2C, ***ca. 1920, oil, paper and metal on wood, 23½ by 15½ inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art.***

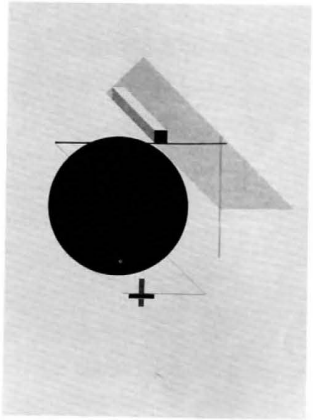


Proun 12E, ***1923, oil on canvas, 22½ by 16⅝ inches. Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University.***

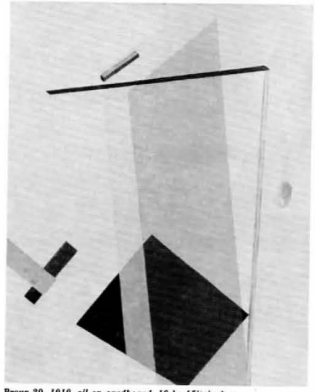
Lissitzky must have taken pleasure in representing real materials; his genius as a craftsman and his interest in "faktura" were not diminished even by the codes of socialist realism.

discourse. As Buchloh points out, much work remains to be done on the way the Russian avant-garde was progressively enlisted in the service of the totalitarian cause, and an analysis of the "rationalist" evolution of Lissitzky's materiology—as this exhibition teaches us—will have to play a vital role in this work. □

1. It is true that two of the plates of the *First Kestner Portfolio* refer to the famous 1923 *Proun Room*, and that the *Proun Room* itself, as well as the exhibition rooms of Dresden and Hannover, were mentioned in a wall text. In addition, *Die Kunstismen*, an anthology on the art of 1914–24 that Lissitzky compiled with Arp, was judiciously displayed open to a reproduction of the well-known *Lenin Tribune* of 1920–24. Finally, in the catalogue, conceived as a supplement to the exhibition, Nisbet touches upon the question of Lissitzky's "environmental" and architectural works.
2. Peter Nisbet, "An Introduction to El Lissitzky," in *El Lissitzky (1890–1941)*, exhibition catalogue, Cambridge, Mass., Busch-Reisinger Museum, 1987, p. 52, note 113. In addition, Christina Lodder has informed me that Naum Gabo, who despised Lissitzky to the point of denying him the paternity of one of his typographical masterpieces, the cover for the *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* catalogue (Galerie van Diemen, Berlin, 1922), believed him to be a Cheka agent. (This is hardly conceivable if only, paradoxically, because of Lissitzky's longevity.)
3. The contrast is emphasized in the exhibition by the inclusion, in the Jewish room, near the door that leads into the big hall, of one of Lissitzky's earliest lithographed *Prouns*, accompanied by one of his clearest demonstrations of the reversibility of *Proun* space. (I will come back later to this graphic experiment in which the same lithograph is printed four times on the same page, but in four different positions.)
4. The specialists Nisbet attacks here are Alan Birnholz and John Bowlt. Nisbet, *El Lissitzky*, p. 47, note 21.
5. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky—Life, Letters, Texts*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1968, p. 20.
6. Benjamin Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October*, no. 30, Fall 1984, p. 114.
7. Buchloh's argument in favor of the "political sincerity" of these artists in their support of the Stalinist cause, "as is evident from the fact that an artist such as Tatlin, who did not work for the state agencies, continued to live his private, if economically miserable existence without harassment" (ibid.) is, I believe, beside the point for two reasons. First, because Tatlin's not being imprisoned could be taken as an exception (either because of an error by Stalinist bureaucracy or because he was protected by someone in this bureaucracy); second, because the question of "sincerity" in no way alters the fact, amply demonstrated by Buchloh, that photomontage develops in just a few years from "factography" to the "sheer adulation of totalitarian power."
8. These quotations from Nisbet, *El Lissitzky*, p. 44.



Proun, ***1923, one of six lithographs from the*** **First Kestner Portfolio,** ***24 by 17 inches. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.***



Proun 30, ***1919, oil on cardboard, 19 by 15½ inches. Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg, Halle.***

If the factography of the later photomontages turned into "sheer adulation of totalitarian power," it is perhaps because Lissitzky attempted to turn his art into a non-critical tool.

9. As Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers writes, "Now it suddenly became clear that he must return home, not only for the sake of his sorrowing parents, but also because of his own function as a creative artist, for the fulfillment of which there were tasks of a special kind awaiting him. He was needed in his homeland; the Soviet Union needed all his knowledge, his experience, his art." Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 58.
10. In order to substantiate his argument, Nisbet refers to several unpublished notes of 1924 in which Lissitzky "writes a little condescendingly about communism as the 'kitchen phase,' which would clearly be overcome in the progress of society 'from — to +.'" But it seems obvious that Lissitzky is referring to the spontaneous experiments in communal living of the first days of the revolution which were then taken up by architects after 1921, that is, at the very moment when Lenin's NEP (New Economic Policy) was rehabilitating income from private property and private capital. The fact that numerous architectural projects resulted in very few actual constructions shows that the viability of such undertakings was seriously challenged. Although Lissitzky does not address these failures in his 1930 book on Soviet architecture (in fact, he makes direct reference to communal cooking as a question worthy of being considered), it seems obvious that he did not believe in a purely "economic" solution to the problems that Soviet society faced, housing included. It is in this sense, it seems to me, that one must interpret his irony with regard to the "kitchen phase." On the subjects of communal housing and the search for a new type of apartment, in which Lissitzky was interested in 1929, see Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture*, New York, Rizzoli, 1987, pp. 341–98.
11. Ibid., p. 94.
12. El Lissitzky, "New Russian Art" (1922), in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, pp. 335–36.
13. Lissitzky, "Our Book" (1926), in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 358.
14. Nisbet, *El Lissitzky*, p. 21.
15. Ilya Ehrenburg and El Lissitzky, "The Blockade of Russia Moves towards its End" (1922), in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 341.
16. Nisbet, *El Lissitzky*, p. 49, note 45.
17. I mention here only Kronstadt (which occurred after the creation of *Of Two Squares*) because it is the best known of the events of the terrible fight begun by the Bolsheviks against the anarchists in 1918, after having courted them during the period preceding the October uprising, in which they had played a major role. On the subjects of the relationship between anarchists and Bolsheviks, and on Lenin's almost libertarian position in the 1917 *The State of the Revolution*, followed by a clearer and clearer disavowal of these positions after taking power, see Marcel Liebman, *Le Léninisme sous Lénine*, Paris, 1973, vol. I, pp. 279–98, and vol. II, pp. 66–73. About Lissitzky's "Leninism," which Nisbet obviously doubts, I refer to my article, "Lissitzky, censeur de Malevich," in *Macula*, no. 3/4, 1978, pp. 191–201.
18. In his catalogue raisonné of Lissitzky's typographical work, Nisbet devotes an entry to this poster and would obviously have included it in the exhibition had he found an original copy. Nevertheless, such honorable "purism" seems somewhat excessive under the circumstances. I do not really see why a reprint would not do; the white of the original image no doubt would be more convincing in a newer printing.
19. Nisbet, *El Lissitzky*, p. 182 and p. 48, note 37. During a symposium on Lissitzky organized by Nisbet for this exhibition, Nisbet further insisted on the limited scope of this political poster by referring to the specific context from which it arose.
20. Jean-François Lyotard, "Espace plastique et espace politique" (1970), reprinted in *Dérivé à partir de Marx et de Freud*, Paris, U.G.E., 1973, p. 300.
21. Ibid., pp. 302–03.
22. Ibid., p. 303.
23. Alan Birnholz has shown the debt that Lissitzky's factory board owes to Malevich's *And What Have You Done for the Front*, which dates from the same period (*El Lissitzky*, Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1973, vol. I, pp. 110–11).
24. Birnholz, *El Lissitzky*, pp. 114–15. Nisbet takes up the suggestion without, unfortunately, bringing in any additional evidence.
25. Piet Mondrian, "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," scene III, *De Stijl*, vol. II, no. 12, 1919, p. 136; English translation in Piet Mondrian, *The New Art—The New Life*, eds. Harry Holtzman and Martin James, Boston, G. K. Hall, 1987, p. 98.
26. Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, A Memoir*, London, Oxford University Press, 1958, pp. 58–59.
27. Lissitzky, "Proun," translated in the catalogue *El Lissitzky*, Cologne, Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976, p. 67.
28. Ibid., p. 65.
29. See Troels Andersen, *Malevich*, exhibition catalogue, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, 1970, p. 31.
30. Kenneth Frampton, "The Work and Influence of El Lissitzky," in David Lewis, ed., *Urban Structure (Architect's Yearbook*, vol. 12), London, Elek, 1968, p. 262.
31. Lissitzky, "Art and Pangeometry" (1924), in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 350.
32. Historically, the zero played a much greater role in Indian and Chinese science than it did in Western science, where it was used as an operational number only after the Arab conquests, and was only theorized as such in the 16th century by Cardano and Tartaglia (to whom Lissitzky refers).
33. Josef Albers's *Structural Constellations*—a kind of abstract version of the famous duck/rabbit figure—are the mechanical exploitations of this seesaw property inherent to axonometry.
34. It is worth mentioning that Brecht was very interested in Chinese painting, which uses axonometry to represent buildings. A small text he wrote on the question could serve as a commentary on the *Prouns*: "We know that the Chinese do not use perspective; they do not like to consider everything from one angle. . . . Chinese composition lacks the constraining element that is so familiar to us. Its order is arrived at without violence. The sheets of paper reflect a great freedom. The eye can go about discovering. The things represented play the role of elements that could exist separately and independently, and yet they form a whole by their interrelations on the sheet; a whole which is nevertheless not indivisible. . . . The artist is not content merely to deny the surface of the whole simply by covering it entirely. The mirror in which something is reflected continues to stand out as a mirror. This implies, among other things, that one has gladly renounced the idea of totally dominating the spectator, whose illusion can never be total." Bertolt Brecht, "Sur la peinture chinoise," in *Sur le réalisme*, Paris, L'Arche, 1970, pp. 68–69.
35. Lissitzky, "Proun—Not world visions, but world reality" (1922), in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 343.
36. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 292.
37. This sheet contains the following inscription, whose rhetoric sounds much like Malevich's: "Construction floating in space, propelled together with its spectator beyond the limits of the earth, and in order to complete it, the spectator must turn it and himself around its axis like a planet. This plan is only a mechanical demonstration of entering the essence of the construction—only four phases."
38. Unfortunately, the example exhibited, from the Costakis collection, is mounted on paper and its margins are cropped. Thus one cannot see the four P's. But it is certainly an artist's proof, for Lissitzky "has enclosed the framing rectangle of this composition in a penciled circle, and has written instructions with directional arrows indicating that the composition is to be rotated so that it can be viewed on each of its four sides" (Angelica Rudenstine, *Russian Avant-Garde Art: The George Costakis Collection*, New York, Abrams, 1981, no. 455, p. 246).
39. Hung without a frame and seen in yet another position on a photograph in the "abstract" room that Lissitzky organized at the Dresden International Art Exhibition in 1926, the painting corresponding to this lithograph was obviously conceived to be the object of constant rotation (see Lissitzky-Küppers, plate 187).
40. Lissitzky, "From a Letter" (1923), in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 344.
41. Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 26.
42. On this subject, see my article, "Mondrian's *New York City*," *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 2, Winter 1988, pp. 244–77. In this article, the theme of the "flatbed" is developed from two texts by Walter Benjamin written in 1917 on the Cubist question.
43. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria—Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, London, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 84–90.
44. Lissitzky, "New Russian Art," pp. 333–34.
45. Lissitzky, "Proun," p. 64.
46. According to Nisbet, Lissitzky was tempted at one point to use his *Prouns* directly in the architectural domain. This is how he interprets the many architectural tiles of the first *Prouns* and the use of *The Town* in the poster *The Factory Workbenches Await You* as well as in the photomontage on the cover of his 1930 book on Soviet architecture. But it is merely the pictorial *image* of architecture here, not its actual realization. I do not think that one can say that "Lissitzky is clearly translating the Suprematism of his mentor Malevich into a three-dimensional variant, but one that not only included the theoretical 'Suprematism of volume' (as he inscribed on the verso of an early work) but also individual and specific architectural tasks" (Nisbet, *El Lissitzky*, p. 20). I believe Nisbet is closer to the truth when he describes the following phase (in which architectural titles are eliminated) as one that insists on "the utopian potential of *Proun*, diverting attention from any immediate applicability or external occasion, in favour of a vaguer, but undeniably richer range of associations" (Ibid., p. 21).
47. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," p. 94.
48. Lissitzky, "The Plastic Form of the Electro-Mechanical Peepshow *Victory Over the Sun*" (1923), in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 348.

Translation by Alyson Waters.

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Produce More Tanks, ***poster, 1942, 35 by 23 inches.***